

Did you know that you can make a presentation to your local council meetings on subjects you're passionate about? I consider myself a pretty politically savvy person and I didn't know that until I was in my late 20s!

Making a presentation is an incredibly powerful way of engaging with your local council. You'll generally need to keep an eye on the council websites where they will post details of upcoming meetings, what the agenda is and if there's a space for public presentations (usually presentations will tie in to agenda items in some way, although exceptions can be made).

"There is so much community knowledge out there. Councillors can only grow and learn by listening to those who have lived in our communities for generations."

- *Rehette Stoltz, Mayor, Gisborne District Council*

Another option is to message someone within the council's meeting team and ask if they have any opportunities coming up where you can present on the topic you're concerned or enthusiastic about. Once you're sure you want to speak, you'll need to request (via phone or email) to be added to the list of speakers. They'll let you know what time you need to be there and how long you have to speak (sometimes it's only 3 minutes or so if a topic is popular or contentious). Then it's up to you!

Presenting to a council lets the councillors put a human face to an opinion (or sometimes several faces, given that I've had my small children with me a couple of times when presenting!) You're speaking directly to councillors and can emote in a way that you just can't when it's a written submission. Of course, it's not for everyone but if you really want to get a point across, it's really effective.

Public speaking not appealing? Don't worry, because there's plenty of other ways to make yourself heard.

"When I am making a decision I try to ask myself some of these questions. What does this community want? Why are we doing this? What difference will it make? By engaging and getting feedback we humanise our decisions."

- *Carmen Houlahan, first term councillor, Dunedin City Council*

Liking and following your local councillors (and your local council page) on Facebook (or Twitter, Instagram etc) is a really simple way to stay abreast of issues and to connect with your councillors. Many are frequent posters who will give their opinion on local issues and welcome comments. Adding a brief comment for or against an issue or asking a clarifying question is a really quick way to show your thoughts. It's also a good way to see when there are issues you can submit on—council pages and councillors will often post about topics up for consultation.

Speaking of submissions, written ones are a well-known way to give feedback to councils and it doesn't have to be as time-consuming as you think. Many people shy away from submissions because they seem scary and laborious. However, something as simple as 'I support the council's position on additional bus lanes as detailed in this proposal' is still worth adding because it's one more voice backing a particular stance. Of course, if it's a

subject you're knowledgeable about then you can make your submission as detailed as you like.

“Community feedback and engagement helps me make better decisions and understand what is important to people.”

- Fleur Fitzsimons, second term councillor, Wellington City Council

Councils will usually have a section on their website detailing proposals that are open for consultation but, you can often find out about them on social media as well, either through council media channels or community groups.

You can also find out a bit more about how it all works by having a look through some council meeting agendas or watching video recordings of their meetings. This can help you to see how things work and start to get a feel for the issues they discuss.

Through those agendas, you may also find out about local groups who are already speaking to the council. If there's one that seems to align with your views and values, look them up. Most community groups are constantly searching for new people to help out, and being part of a group can make submitting feel a bit less intimidating!

We are lucky in New Zealand that it's so straightforward to contact a councillor directly via email or by requesting a face-to-face meeting. Emails for councillors are again usually listed on the council websites so it's easy to message them your views on a topic. You can also use their email addresses or phone the council to ask them for face-to-face meetings if you feel comfortable doing so—it's another really powerful and personal way to communicate.

“To have the voice of the people, behind your own at the table, is literal wind in your sails. When I am advocating on behalf of a sector of my community, who have given me the privilege of their voice, knowing that they are behind that voice encourages me to be bolder and braver in the way I represent.”

- Rachel Smith, first term councillor, Far North District Council

If you want to meet with councillors face-to-face but don't quite feel at ease with a one-on-one meeting, most councils organise public meet-and-greet type events where you have the opportunity to meet staff and councillors. Sometimes these will relate to a particular consultation; other times they'll be a more general opportunity to chat. There are also outreach offices where you can talk to council staff in many communities. Once again, keeping an eye on the Council website and their Facebook pages is the best way to find out when these meetings are, or you can just phone up and ask if there are any coming up in your area.

The bottom line is that there are loads of ways to get in touch with your council; and the thing is, they really want to hear from you! Public support on issues like housing density, public and active transport goes a long way in getting some of the more “controversial” (read, “actually doing something about the issue”) plans across the line. It can be easy to assume that research, science and common sense will be followed but those are often drowned out by a tide of biased opinion.

"It's so important to hear this feedback because otherwise councils will just carry on with business as usual or end up following the advice of the people who do have the time and resources to submit and influence the council. I've learnt so much from submitters and also from people who have written to me, called me up, met with me, it's been amazing."

- Thomas Nash, first term councillor, Greater Wellington Regional Council

Submissions and meetings tend to be dominated by home-owning older people (love you Grandad!) because they're the ones with the most free time and disposable income. If you don't fit into that category, your view really matters when it comes to shaping cities and districts that are future-focused and prioritised around ALL residents. **Make your voice heard this election campaign and beyond!**